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What happens if you introduce existential psychology into sport psychology?

Jeff Greenberg and Dave Weise

Something good, we think. Sport psychology provides psychological help to athletes and coaches. To do so optimally, it is important to recognize that sports participants are, first and foremost, human beings with the same psychological needs as other members of the species. Existential psychology provides insights into what those psychological needs are and how they may be met. In this chapter, we will summarize these insights and illustrate their value for sport psychologists.

It is useful to begin with the realization that human beings are animals with many of the needs and attributes of other animals. Humans are equipped with many biological systems oriented toward continued survival, and some that facilitate procreation. In addition, as mammals, humans are prone toward attachment to conspecifics and care of offspring. Humans also have certain especially adaptive attributes. Perhaps most important is their intelligence.

Humans have thrived largely because of the intellectual capacities afforded by their highly developed cerebral cortex. We are aware of our existence; we use linguistic symbols to communicate and problem-solve, and we think about the past and imagine possible futures. We use past knowledge and our imaginations to respond flexibly to our environments and develop effective, often novel approaches to achieving our goals.

We can also step back and experience the awe and joy of being alive and accomplishing the amazing things we and others do. This elation is one of the main reasons we enjoy sports so much. Famous athletes such as Usain Bolt, LeBron James, and Ana Ivanovic can marvel at their accomplishments, and fans can too. We can also marvel at our own and others’ more modest achievements on courts and fields around the world. And we reminisce about these things and imagine future accomplishments with relish.

These consequences of human intelligence are great, but there is another consequence not so exhilarating: an awareness of sobering facts of human existence – the certainty of death, the uncertainties of what life means and who we are, the complexities of our relations to others, and the choices we make. The term “existential” refers to these basic inescapable realities of the human condition. Accordingly, existential psychology focuses on our concerns and anxieties regarding these realities.
Existential psychology

This field builds on the insights of philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus. Existential themes emerged in the seminal writings of William James and Sigmund Freud, but existential psychology was first developed by Otto Rank (1931/1961), and later expanded by authors such as Rollo May (1953), Victor Frankl (1959), Robert Jay Lifton (1967), Ernest Becker (1973), and Irvin Yalom (1980).

Although existential psychologists traditionally eschewed experimental psychology, since the 1980s an explosion of experimental research has investigated the nature and consequences of five existential concerns: death, meaning, identity, isolation, and freedom. These issues have been labeled the Big Five existential concerns, and research regarding them has led to the field of experimental existential psychology (XXP; Koole, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2006). We refer readers to the Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology (Greenberg, Koole, & Pyszczynski, 2004) for in-depth coverage of XXP.

Research regarding the Big Five existential concerns demonstrates that they play substantial roles in human behavior. From the existential perspective, people's actions serve a hierarchy of goals, and coping with these Big Five concerns constitutes the higher order, largely unconscious goals that more concrete, conscious goals ultimately serve (Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1992; Yalom, 1980). Day to day, people focus on concrete goals that help them: (a) believe they will transcend their own deaths and that they are more than material creatures; (b) maintain the view that life is meaningful; (c) sustain a coherent sense of identity; (d) feel intimately connected to others; and (e) optimize personal freedom.

When these concrete goals are not being met, the higher order existential concerns they serve approach consciousness and arouse anxiety. This existential anxiety can fuel personal growth or maladaptive defenses that contribute to anxiety, depression, identity disorders, and alcohol and drug abuse. Existential psychotherapy (Yalom, 1980) helps individuals shift from maladaptive defenses toward more beneficial modes of addressing their existential concerns, modes that contribute to, rather than hinder, effective functioning and life satisfaction.

The existential big five and sports

Sports provide ideal examples of the culturally constructed nature of our sense of permanence, meaning, identity, social connection, and freedom. On the one hand, sports are highly valued; on the other, tasks such as putting a rubber ball through a hoop are arbitrarily assigned value and are easy to see as meaningless. This view of sports itself can be useful when it is important to help someone put sport in perspective and view it as one of many aspects of life.

For athletes and coaches, sports play significant roles in all of the Big Five existential concerns. Sports can make people feel mortal or truly immortal, imbue life with meaning or call it into question; they can solidify identities and self-worth or undermine them; they can make athletes feel all alone or an integral part of something special; they can be vehicles for asserting personal freedom or constrainers of our sense of freedom.

When things are going well, sports provide paths to feel enduringly significant, and to believe that life is meaningful. They provide a strong sense of identity and social connection and offer a good balance of autonomy and structure that provides manageable levels of freedom. The existential concerns kept at bay by these psychological resources will
approach consciousness primarily when events within or outside sport disrupt these ongoing functions.

Accordingly, sport psychologists should be alert to such events. When disruptions arouse one or more existential concerns, people may experience psychological difficulties with anxiety and depression, and they are likely to attempt to intensify their modes of coping in either constructive or maladaptive ways. Six major kinds of sports-related events seem most likely to arouse the Big Five existential concerns: death, injury, retirement, career change (e.g., being traded), failure, and success. Each of these six types of events could arouse any of the Big Five concerns. As we discuss each Big Five concern in turn, we will provide examples of sports events particularly likely to arouse them.

Death

The knowledge that one will inevitably die conflicts with the desire for continued life. According to terror management theory (TMT), the potential for anxiety engendered by this awareness of one's mortality is managed by embracing a culturally based conception of reality, or cultural worldview (see Greenberg, Solomon, & Arndt, 2008, for a recent review). This internalized worldview allows individuals to believe they are eternally significant members of a meaningful universe, rather than material animals fated only to obliteration upon death. Consequently, to function with minimal anxiety despite the awareness of mortality, individuals must sustain faith in a meaning-providing cultural worldview and garner self-esteem, which is provided by the belief that they are living up to the standards of value of that worldview. For athletes and coaches, sports are central aspects of their worldviews and bases of self-worth.

Experimental research consisting of over 400 studies has supported TMT. One line of research has shown that a meaningful conception of reality and a strong sense of self-worth protect people from anxiety and specifically from their fears of death. Both self-report and physiological measures of anxiety have shown these effects. The central message from this line of work is that self-esteem is the primary way people buffer anxieties in their daily lives.

A second line of research has shown that reminders of mortality lead individuals to bolster faith in their cultural worldviews and strive harder for self-worth. Two studies directly established a link between existential concern with death and sports. Taubman Ben-Ari, Florian, and Mikulincer (1999) showed that reminders of mortality led people who based their self-esteem partly on driving skills to drive more boldly in a simulated driving game and to claim to be more willing to take risks in their driving. Peters, Greenberg, Williams, and Schneider (2005) showed that for people who base self-worth partly on their physical strength, reminders of their mortality increased their displays of handgrip strength.

A third line of research has shown that these defensive responses are activated whenever death-related thoughts are on the fringes of consciousness, and they function to dissipate these thoughts and thereby avert the potential anxiety such thoughts engender. Finally, a fourth line of research has shown that when faith in the worldview or self-esteem is threatened, or when people are reminded of their corporeal nature, death-related thoughts move closer to consciousness.

Death rears its ugly head in sports in three main ways. First, physical risks of death are prevalent in a number of sports, including auto racing, boxing, and mountain climbing. This threat undoubtedly weighs on athletes and coaches involved in these sports. Second, close calls in these and other sports may be traumatic, arousing fears and intrusive memories of
such events. Third, athletes and coaches may learn of the deaths of others within their sports, and this reminder can arouse death-related concerns. Even in sports such as baseball, basketball, and soccer, freak fatal accidents occur during practices and games, and these events may bring mortality to the fore. Furthermore, members of one’s sport, or one’s own team, may die suddenly outside the realm of their sport activities.

Athletes and coaches reminded of death in these ways often have specific methods of denying, coping with, or accepting the general risks they face, the harrowing experiences they have, and the news of the death of a fellow athlete. Some develop superstitious rituals; others may rely on religious faith or social support. Sport psychologists should be alert to these strategies and the extent to which they are constructive, harmless, or harmful.

Beyond these strategies, TMT and research suggest that faith in the meaningfulness of sports pursuits and the sense of self-worth athletes derive from them, as well as from other aspects of their lives, will play a considerable role in the effectiveness with which they cope with, and even gain motivation from, these intimations of death. In the case of the death of a current or former teammate, memorializing the individual and dedicating the season to the player or coach are common tactics for denying the finality of death by keeping memories of the fallen colleague alive (see Chapter 38 on death of a teammate).

Finally, terror management research also suggests that serious injuries and major failures can arouse thoughts of death. Serious injuries are salient reminders to athletes that they are physical beings, and hence, mortal creatures. Major failures puncture the protective bubble of symbolic self-worth that normally keeps death-related anxieties at bay. Such failures can lead to defensive lashing out at others in an attempt to deflect blame to try to restore self-esteem. It can also lead to self-medicating through anxiety-reducing alcohol and other drugs. Thus, sport psychologists may want to consider that even events superficially unrelated to death can stir death-related fears that may initiate destructive attempts to cope with this existential anxiety.

When individuals’ faith in their worldviews and self-worth can be restored through concrete actions, underlying death concerns can be alleviated. Theory and research, however, suggest that when straightforward constructive paths to restoring these psychological resources are lacking, deeper probing into thoughts and emotions concerning death may be useful for guiding individuals toward new constructive paths of coping (e.g., Greenberg et al., 2004; Yalom, 1980).

**Meaning**

A meaningful view of life quells death-related concerns, provides purpose, and gives people clear paths to adaptive actions. Given that we will all die, that our understanding of the universe is limited, and that cultures around the world have substantially different ideas about existence, how can we sustain meaning in life? Meaning for people often comes through cultural worldviews conveyed to them over the course of socialization by parents, teachers, mass media, and religious, social, and political institutions.

Knowledge of alternative views of life’s meanings and of unexpected and unjust life events, however, often challenges our beliefs about what is meaningful. Such threats can arouse feelings of personal alienation and thoughts that life is pointless, and thereby arouse anxiety and depressive ideation. People cope with threats to meaning either by compensatory efforts to strengthen elements of their worldviews or by seeking new meaning systems, as happens when people convert to a new religion or cult (see Greenberg et al., 2004).
In sports, death or serious injuries can threaten meaning. These events evoke questions such as “Why me?” and threaten one’s faith that the world is just. Athletes may believe that their injuries are not fair and realize that such events can happen at any time to anybody, increasing their feelings of uncertainty about meaning in life. Framing these disturbing events as meaningful, for example, as challenges to show one’s mettle, and offering hope of overcoming them, can restore a sense of meaning.

Ironically, great achievements in sports can also threaten meaning. After years of training and competing, athletes may achieve their ultimate goals. Subsequently, the athletes will probably experience a period of elation regarding the accomplishments, but then they may ask: “Now what?” On this note, Becker (1974) stated:

> It is the loneliness of the man who has found his talents, realized his identity, pushed his ambition to the fullest, and achieved something of a success in his life, a recognition of his talents. He is then often put in a position to realize that the superlative achievement of cultural heroism somehow rings hollow.

(in Liechty, 2005, p. 234)

To get past this hollow feeling, practitioners can help individuals develop additional goals within the sport, such as pursuing another championship or record, or develop new goals outside the sport.

Identity

We all want to have clear identities, to know who we are. In addition to bestowing meaningful conceptions of the world, cultures provide us with roles and group affiliations that help us develop our identities and goals that support those identities. Erickson (1968) posited that adolescence is a key time for developing a clear identity. Nevertheless, throughout one’s life, our beliefs about ourselves require validation from other people. When we fall short of their expectations, we may feel uncertain about aspects of our identities, which can arouse considerable anxiety. To attempt to reduce this anxiety, people often cling tightly and rigidly to their cherished beliefs about themselves. At other times, they may choose to give up an identity and seek new group affiliations, relationships, and career paths to more firmly establish a sense of who they are.

Over the lifespan, each of us has a variety of different beliefs, values, and goals: we look, feel, and act differently in different situations over time. In light of this variability, how do people maintain coherent identities? People do so primarily by viewing their lives as ongoing stories with themselves as the protagonists. McAdams (2001) suggested that we order our life experiences in logical time sequences that tell the stories of our identities, how we became who we are and where we expect to go in life. Research supports the value of having an integrated sense of self over time. Self-narrative research indicates that writing a coherent story (as opposed to making a fragmented list) about a traumatic life event has positive health benefits (e.g., Smyth, True, & Sotto, 2001). This work suggests that getting clients to write or talk extensively about such events can be beneficial because it facilitates integrating the events into their self-narratives.

For longtime athletes or coaches, identities are often tied up in their roles within their sports. When their careers end, whether due to injury, age, retirement, or being fired, their identities may become uncertain. To the extent that identity allows one to experience the world in a meaningful way and guides action, athletes may have difficulties deciding
what to do with their time, or finding things to do that are as meaningful as the sporting activity.

Letting go of their primary sports identities and establishing post-sports identities that allow them to sustain their sense of value within society is often a difficult task. In the film *The Wrestler*, a professional wrestler has a chance to quit and greatly improve his social relationships outside the ring, but ultimately he can’t let go of the minor heroism provided by his identity as a wrestler. In real life, sports identities may be so strong that many star athletes have difficulty staying retired (e.g., Björn Borg, Brett Favre, Martina Hingis).

Long-term plans and career-marking ceremonies can facilitate smooth transitions to post-career identities by helping individuals sustain coherent self-narratives. This transition is easiest when post-career endeavors still relate to the former sports-based identity (e.g., coaching, sports broadcasting). Furthermore, the more individuals already have well-established multiple identities outside of sports during their careers (e.g., spouse, parent, business person, philanthropist), the easier it will be to give up their center-stage sports identities when circumstances dictate this. See Chapters 26 and 30 on career termination and identity foreclosure, respectively, in this book.

**Isolation**

Based on our mammalian ancestry, humans have needs to attach to and feel connected with fellow humans. Nevertheless, we all have interior subjective experiences that we can never entirely share with others. We can try to communicate our inner experiences through words, facial expressions, and body language, but we can never fully know another’s conscious experience, and no one can ever fully know ours. This realization can arouse feelings of loneliness and isolation that generate anxiety and depression. Research suggests that people try to cope with these feelings by seeking intimacy in their close relationships and by sustaining interpersonal affiliations and group identities that help them conceive themselves as part of a larger whole rather than as an isolated organism.

One effective way to feel less isolated is to develop a relationship with someone who seems to have similar subjective experiences of reality as oneself, a process known as I-sharing (Pinel, Long, Landau, Alexander, & Pyszczynski, 2006). Research has demonstrated that sharing subjective experiences (e.g., giggling at a quirky behavior of another) leads to more attraction than sharing objective characteristics (e.g., having the same hometown).

Another line of research indicates that we attempt to connect by including important others in our self-concepts, a process called self-expansion (Aron & Aron, 1996). In this process, as a relationship deepens, one should perceive more overlap between one’s self-concept and the self-concept of a relationship partner. Consistent with this perspective, people in close relationships allocated a similar level of resources to a close other as they did to themselves (Aron & Aron).

Being cut and traded are common sports experiences that can suddenly disrupt connections to valued colleagues and groups. A severe injury that sidelines a player or coach, thereby removing the person from his or her accustomed social milieu, can have similar effects. Failure can also lead to a deep sense of isolation. In American sports, one sees this process when a football placekicker misses a last minute kick or a baseball pitcher is pulled from a game; fans turn on them, and teammates often drift away from the player.

The ensuing loss of camaraderie and connection can arouse feelings of isolation and alienation. Social support systems of family and friends outside the sport can buffer against such reactions, and establishing new social roles, personal relationships, and group affiliations
can help individuals recover from the blow of disrupted social connections. Although social support can lessen the sting of existential isolation, the sport psychologist may also judiciously use occasions of disrupted social connections to help clients “learn what they cannot get from others” (Yalom, 1980, p. 397).

Ironically, high-level success can contribute to feelings of isolation, hence the cliché that “it’s lonely at the top.” We all want to be special, but we want to maintain our connections to others as well. Superstars may feel particularly isolated because their experiences and pressures are exceptional, and they have to be guarded wherever they go. Whatever they do may become fodder for tabloids. Adulation from strangers can provide a strong sense of value, but it is strange and in some ways unsatisfying to be “loved” by people who don’t really know you. Many people want to be around sports stars to bask in their reflected glory, make money, and share in the lifestyle. But with so many ulterior motives for being befriended, how can stars know if others ever genuinely care about them? How many of these people would stick around if their careers fell apart? Family and friends who were there prior to their success can help stars feel grounded, as they are people who really know and accept them, regardless of what they can gain from them. Whether they are feeling isolated because of career-ending events or because of exceptional success, being able to have people around with whom the athlete or coach can experience I-sharing and self–other overlap can help sustain the sense of intimate connection they, like all of us, need.

**Freedom**

Freedom is perhaps the most complex existential concern because people are ambivalent about it. On the one hand, people generally like choice, control, a sense of independence, and autonomy. Reactance theory explains how people defend against threats to their perceived freedoms (see Brehm & Brehm, 1981). Also, self-determination theory and research show how people function optimally when they have a sense of autonomy and feel that their actions are self-determined (Deci & Ryan, 2003).

On the other hand, Rank (1931/1961), Fromm (1941), and others noted that freedom offers people so many choices that they can become mired in indecision. Furthermore, freedom brings a great burden of responsibility for one’s own actions, and potential guilt, shame, and regret. Consequently, people often willingly give up their freedoms to close others, groups, leaders, and social institutions (see Turner, 1991), allowing them to make their decisions, thereby reducing their potential guilt.

Athletes and coaches are usually parts of larger systems. They answer to higher authorities, such as head coaches, owners, and sports governing bodies. Sports participants can view these contextual factors as overly restrictive of their freedoms, contributing to resentment, dissatisfaction, and reactance. Sometimes the answer is to get out of the context; other times it is best to recognize the value of the larger structure and the freedoms one does have within it. Similarly, at times the larger organization may provide too much freedom and not enough structure. An individual might do well as an assistant coach but not be suited to the additional demands of being a head coach. Another individual may thrive as a head coach but not be able to handle the additional choices of simultaneously functioning as the general manager. One football quarterback could thrive calling his own plays and audibling a lot, whereas another is better off having them called by the coaches. People differ in their perceived freedoms, their desires for control, and their needs for structure (e.g., Burger & Cooper, 1979). The optimal situation is a good match between the structure provided by
the organization and the needs of the individual. If there is a strong mismatch, some form of change is needed.

Fans and injuries can also restrict freedoms and arouse reactance responses. Fan expectations, adulation, and stalking, particularly for major stars, can impinge on athletes’ and coaches’ freedoms, both within their sport lives and their private lives as well. Some people can handle the pressures well, some not so well. There are constructive measures that can be taken to minimize these threats to freedom, but again, sometimes it’s a matter of match. If a soccer player is likely to have difficulty with restrictions of freedom in his personal life, playing for Manchester United may simply not be the right choice for that individual.

Finally, injuries and age can restrict freedoms. Because of these factors, athletes may have to realize that they cannot do all the things they once could. They may have to learn to accept these restrictions and optimize their play in other ways. For example, in his later years Michael Jordan learned to rely more on his jump shot and defensive positioning, and a bit less on his leaping ability and raw speed. Rather than becoming frustrated with the physical limitations of aging, he adjusted to the point where many observers felt he became a better player later in his career (although not during his post-retirement comeback). A broad acceptance of the realities of the physical body and of aging may facilitate optimal adjustments in one’s functioning within and outside sports.

Conclusion

We suggest that sport psychologists add knowledge of XXP to the theoretical basis of their therapeutic repertoires. Although athletes and coaches may sometimes be at a loss for words as to what is bothering them, the Big Five existential concerns may often be at the root of their unhappiness. XXP is a young field, so only broad recommendations for assessment and treatment can be offered at this time.

When clients experience one of the six types of events likely to arouse existential concerns, sport psychologists could administer a subset of available measures pertinent to the Big Five (Greenberg et al., 2004). These measures assess: death anxiety, the accessibility of death-related thoughts, and sense of symbolic immortality; meaningfulness of and satisfaction with life; self-clarity, self-coherence, and self-worth; self–other overlap and feelings of social disconnection; needs for control and structure; a sense of autonomy; and perceptions of being controlled.

If such assessment tools confirm a deficit in managing one or more of these existential concerns, one of two broad approaches to helping the client can be useful (cf., Yalom, 1980). Sometimes, just being aware of these deeper concerns aroused by life challenges can assist the practitioner in developing strategies to help restore salubrious paths of coping. This first approach is probably preferred when clients are not very consciously aware of their existential concerns and when specific strategies to facilitate progress toward the concrete goals that serve the higher order existential concerns are readily identifiable.

A second, more direct approach, however, is useful when clients are either: (a) self-aware and introspective, and thus conscious of the existential issues; or (b) need to make substantial changes in their concrete goals to shore up the psychological resources that quell existential concerns. For such clients, sport psychologists would find it useful to bring one or more of these concerns into awareness and help the clients confront these concerns consciously and in depth. This approach can help clients let go of concrete goals no longer feasible and move toward constructing new and more effective goal pursuits that will better
serve their deepest existential needs (Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1992; Yalom, 1980). Either way XXP is used, we believe that it can enrich the practice of sport psychology. See Box 16.1 for take-home messages from this chapter.

Box 16.1

Take-home messages about existential psychology

- Human intelligence leads to awareness of existential concerns, which can cause anxiety.
- Disruptions in concrete everyday goals (e.g., failure, retirement) arouse these largely unconscious concerns, known as the existential Big Five: death, meaning, identity, isolation, and freedom.
- Coaches’ or athletes’ responses to increased awareness of these existential issues can vary from maladaptive to constructive.
- A goal of the existential sport psychologist is to help guide the athlete or coach experiencing these existential concerns toward constructive means of coping.

References


